

Army Modernization – the Big Picture

By Neil Abercrombie

When it comes to modernizing the U.S. Army, the question isn't whether, but how. At the close of World War II, our national leaders determined that one of the most effective ways to ensure that America would never again be caught so unprepared for foreign hostility was to maintain a large standing Army. In those sixty years, the Army has continuously upgraded and replaced equipment, an imperative in a world where an Army may not have a lot of time to mobilize. This continuous process of upgrading and replacing equipment is, however, just one dimension of modernization.

Any reasonable view of modernizing the Army must use a wide lens. In my opinion, two critical issues stand out: the need to pursue multiple approaches to modernization as a hedge against uncertainty; and a need to account for the demands of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Diversity must be a watchword for Army modernization because the force must be prepared for a wide range of missions in a wide range of environments against a wide range of potential threats. Overinvestment in any one technology or program is therefore foolish. Instead, a broad portfolio approach is better suited to the world our troops operate in today and may operate in tomorrow. And, despite the hysterical reaction to House-approved Armed Services Committee funding adjustments in the Future Combat Systems (FCS) in 2008 by program advocates — both inside and outside the Army — the Army's own budget and plans appear to recognize this fact.

For example, the Army requested and received more than \$20 billion in the 2008 National Defense Authorization bill recently passed by the House of Representatives for modernization above and beyond the FCS program. Requested funding to upgrade tanks, trucks, personnel carriers, communications equipment, computer systems, and myriad other items received bipartisan support. While some advocates of the FCS program may disparage current equipment like the M1 tank as an antique, the Army intends to spend \$7 million per tank to equip them with the latest technology. Someone in the Army apparently thinks that upgrading these antiques is important.

Second, the Future Combat Systems program, which some advocates claim is the Army's only "comprehensive" modernization program, is in fact nothing of the sort. Instead, it is one part of the Army's modernization plans. The proof is in the Army's own plans for FCS: the intent is to fully upgrade only fifteen of seventy-six combat brigades by 2029. Thus, based on the Army's own plans for FCS, it is clearly part of the modernization plan, but far from the only part. As a result, claims that funding adjustments that may slow or adjust the program would be "fatal" to Army modernization are simply not credible.

Any broad-based approach to Army modernization must recognize the ever-increasing cost of maintaining and equipping troops in combat today. All wars are expensive, and at some point the Army's plans for future systems must take these costs into account. To pursue a fantasy that fighting wars can be done on the cheap and independent of the rest of the military's budget simply does not recognize reality.

The Army's own estimates to repair and replace equipment damaged in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan is \$15 billion for every year of combat, plus the same amount for two years after combat operations end. In addition, the Army is pursuing an expensive expansion to its size, preparing to add 65,000 troops to its ranks.

The wars are also leading to skyrocketing costs for new equipment to adapt to enemy tactics. The Army recently said that it will need more than \$20 billion to buy more Mine Resistant Armor Protected (MRAP) vehicles to better protect our troops from roadside bombs and other explosive devices in Iraq.

Finally, the Army National Guard has been stripped nearly bare of equipment to help furnish troops in combat with what they need, and now the National Guard's equipment must be replaced. Where is that funding going to come from? Lower military pay? Fewer benefits for troops and families? Denying equipment to troops in combat? The obvious answer is that some elements of longer-term research programs like FCS need to be deferred to meet urgent, near-term needs. Making this kind of difficult trade off may not be popular with everyone in the military-industrial complex, but in my view it is the only responsible thing to do.

As Congress proceeds with its oversight of the Army's budget, I look forward to engaging with my colleagues and the Army on these issues. My hope is that discussions on this critical issue can take place in the appropriate context and produce an outcome that advances the Army's modernization plans, but takes into full account the situation the Army faces today.

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